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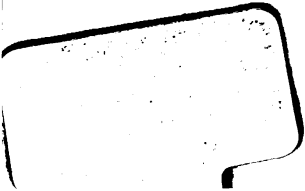
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[by R.L. Stevenson]

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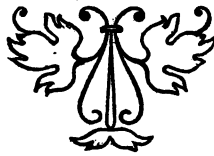


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AN APPEAL
TO THE
Clergy of the Church of Scotland
WITH A NOTE FOR THE LAITY

"Had I a strong voice, as it is the weakest alive, yea, could I lift it up as a trumpet, I would sound a retreat from our unnatural contentions, and irreligious strivings for religion"

ARCHBISHOP LEIGHTON, 1669



William Blackwood & Sons
Edinburgh and London
1875

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AN APPEAL TO THE CLERGY OF THE CHURCH OF SCOTLAND.

GENTLEMEN,—

The position of the Church of Scotland is now one of considerable difficulty ; not only the credit of the Church, not only the credit of Christianity, but to some extent also that of the national character, is at stake. You have just gained a great victory in spite of an opposition neither very logical nor very generous ; you have succeeded in effecting, by quiet constitutional processes, a great reform, which brings your Church somewhat nearer in character to what is required by your Dissenting brethren. It remains to be seen whether you can prove yourselves as generous as you have been wise and patient. And the position, as I say, is one of difficulty. Many, doubtless, left the Church for a reason which is now removed ; many have joined other sects, who would rather have joined themselves with you, had you been then as you now are ; and for these you are bound to render as easy as may be the way of reconciliation, and show, by some notable action, the reality of your own desire for Peace. But I am not unaware that there are others, and those possibly a majority, who hold very different opinions—who regard the old quarrel as still competent, or have found some new reason for dissent ; and from these the Church, if she makes such an advance as she ought to make, in all loyalty and charity, may chance to meet that

most sensible of insults—ridicule, in return for an honest offer of reconciliation. I am not unaware, also, that there is yet another ground of difficulty; and that those even who would be most ready to hold the cause of offence as now removed, will find it hard to forget the past—will continue to think themselves unjustly used—will not be willing to come back, as though they were repentant offenders, among those who delayed the reform and quietly enjoyed their benefices, while they bore the heat and burthen of the day in a voluntary exile for the Truth's sake.

In view of so many elements of difficulty, no intelligent person can be free from apprehension for the result; and you, gentlemen, may be perhaps more ready now to receive advice, to hear and weigh the opinion of one who is free, because he writes without name, than you would be at any juncture less critical. There is now a hope, at least, that some term may be put to our more clamorous dissensions. Those who are at all open to a feeling of national disgrace look eagerly forward to such a possibility; they have been witnesses already too long to the strife that has divided this small corner of Christendom; and they cannot remember without shame that there has been as much noise, as much recrimination, as much severance of friends, about mere logical abstractions in our remote island, as would have sufficed for the great dogmatic battles of the Continent. It would be difficult to exaggerate the pity that fills the heart at such a reflection; at the thought of how this neck of barren hills between two inclement seaways has echoed for three centuries with the uproar of sectarian battle; of how the east wind has carried out the sound of our shrill disputations into the desolate Atlantic, and the west wind has borne it over the German Ocean, as though it would make all Europe privy to how well we Scottish brethren abide together in unity. It is not a bright page in the annals of a small country: it is not a pleasant commentary on the Christianity that we profess; there is something in it, pitiful as I have said for the piti-

ful man, but bitterly humorous for others. How much time we have lost, how much of the precious energy and patience of good men we have exhausted on these trivial quarrels, it would be nauseous to consider ; we know too much already, when we know the facts in block ; we know enough to make us hide our heads for shame, and grasp gladly at any present humiliation, if it would insure a little more quiet, a little more charity, a little more brotherly love, in the distant future.

And it is with this before your eyes that, as I feel certain, you are now addressing yourselves to the consideration of this important crisis. It is with a sense of the blackness of this discredit upon the national character and the national Christianity that, not you alone, but many of other Churches, are now setting themselves to square their future course with the exigencies of the new position of sects ; and it is with you that the responsibility remains. The obligation lies ever on the victor ; and just so surely as you have succeeded in the face of captious opposition in carrying forth the substance of a reform of which others had despaired, just so surely does it lie upon you as a duty to take such steps as shall make that reform available not to you only, but to all your brethren who will consent to profit by it ; not only to all the clergy, but to the cause of decency and peace, throughout your native land. It is earnestly hoped that you may show yourselves worthy of a great opportunity, and do more for the public minds by the example of one act of generosity and humility than you could do by an infinite series of sermons.

Without doubt, it is your intention, on the earliest public opportunity, to make some advance. Without doubt, it is your purpose to improve the advantage you have gained, and to press upon those who quitted your communion some thirty years ago, your great desire to be once more united to them. This, at least, will find a place in the most unfriendly programme you can entertain ; and if there are any in the Free Church (as I doubt not there are some) who

seceded, not so much from any dislike to the just supremacy of the law, as from a belief that the law in these ecclesiastical matters was applied unjustly, I know well that you will be most eager to receive them back again ; I know well that you will not let any petty vanity, any scruple of worldly dignity, stand between them and their honourable return. If, therefore, there were no more to be done than to display to these voluntary exiles the deep sense of your respect for their position, this appeal would be unnecessary, and you might be left to the guidance of your own good feeling.

But it seems to me that there is need of something more ; it seems to me, and I think that it will seem so to you also, that you must go even further, if you would be equal to the importance of the situation. For if there are any among the Dissenters whose consciences are so far satisfied with the provisions of the recent Act that they could now return to your communion, to such, it must not be forgotten, you stand in a position of great delicacy. The conduct of these men you have so far justified ; you have tacitly admitted that there was some ground for dissatisfaction with the former condition of the Church ; and though you may still judge those to have been over scrupulous who were moved by this imperfection to secede, instead of waiting patiently with you until it could be remedied by peaceful means, you must not forget that it is the strong stomach, according to St Paul, that is to consider the weak, and should come forward to meet these brethren with something better than compliments upon your lips. Observe, I speak only of those who would now see their way back to your communion with a clear conscience ; it is their conduct, and their conduct alone, that you have justified, and therefore it is only for them that your special generosity is here solicited. But towards them, if there are any such, your countrymen would desire to see you behave with all consideration. I do not pretend to lay before you any definite scheme of action ; I wish only to let you understand what thoughts are busy in the heads of some

outside your councils, so that you may take this also into consideration when you come to decide. And this, roughly, is how it appears to these: These good men have exposed themselves to the chance of hardship for the sake of their scruples, whilst you, being of a stronger stomach, continued to enjoy the security of national endowments. Some of you occupy the very livings which they resigned for conscience' sake. To others preferment has fallen which would have fallen to them had they been still eligible. If, then, any of them are now content to return, you are bound, if not in justice, then in honour, to do all that you can to testify your respect for brave conviction, and to repair to them such losses as they may have suffered, whether for their first secession or their second. You owe a special duty, not only to the courage that left the Church, but to the wisdom and moderation that now returns to it. And your sense of this duty will find a vent, not only in word, but in action. You will facilitate their return, not only by considerate and brotherly language, but by pecuniary aid; you will seek, by some new endowment scheme, to preserve for them their ecclesiastical status. That they have no claim will be their strongest claim on your consideration. Many of you, if not all, will set apart some share out of your slender livings for their assistance and support; you will give them what you can afford; and you will say to them, as you do so, what I dare to say to you, that what you give is theirs—not only in honour, but in justice.

For you know that the justice that should rule the dealings of Christians, how much more of Christian ministers, is not as the justice of courts of law or equity; and those who profess the morality of Jesus Christ have abjured, in that profession, all that can be urged by policy or worldly prudence. From them we can accept no half-hearted and calculating generosity; they must make haste to be liberal; they must catch with eagerness at all opportunities of service, and the mere whisper of an obligation should be to

them more potent than the decree of a court to others who make profession of a less stringent code. And remember that it lies with you to show to the world that Christianity is something more than a verbal system. In the lapse of generations, men grow weary of unsupported precept. They may wait long, and keep long in memory the bright doings of former days, but they will weary at the last ; they will begin to trouble you for your credentials ; if you cannot give them miracles, they will demand virtue ; if you cannot heal the sick, they will call upon you for some practice of the Christian ethics. Thus people will knock often at a door if only it be opened to them now and again ; but if the door remains closed too long, they will judge the house uninhabited and go elsewhere. And thus it is that a season of persecution, constantly endured, revives the fainting confidence of the people, and some centuries of prosperity may prepare a Church for ruin. You have here at your hand an opportunity to do more for the credit of your Christianity than ever you could do by visions, miracles, or prophecies. A sacrifice such as this would be better worth, as I said before, than many sermons ; and there is a disposition in mankind that would ennoble it beyond much that is more ostentatious ; for men, whether lay or clerical, suffer better the flames of the stake than a daily inconvenience or a pointed sneer, and will not readily be martyred without some external circumstance and a concourse looking on. And you need not fear that your virtue will be thrown away ; the people of Scotland will be quick to understand, in default of visible fire and halter, that you have done a brave action for Christianity and the national weal ; and if they are spared in the future any of the present ignoble jealousy of sect against sect, they will not forget that to that end you gave of your household comfort and stinted your children. Even if you fail—ay, and even if there were not found one to profit by your invitation—your virtue would have still its own reward. Your predecessors gave their lives for ends not always the most Christian : they

were tempted, and slain with the sword ; they wandered in deserts and in mountains, in caves and in dens of the earth. But your action will not be less illustrious ; what you may have to suffer may be a small thing if the world will, but it will have been suffered for the cause of peace and brotherly love.

I have said that the people of Scotland will be quick to appreciate what you do. You know well that they will be quick also to follow your example. But the sign should come from you. It is more seemly that you should lead than follow in this matter. Your predecessors gave the word from their free pulpits which was to brace men for sectarian strife : it would be a pleasant sequel if the word came from you that was to bid them bury all jealousy, and forget the ugly and contentious past in a good hope of peace to come.

What is said in these few pages may be objected to as vague ; it is no more vague than the position seemed to me to demand. Each man must judge for himself what it behoves him to do at this juncture, and the whole Church for herself. All that is intended in this appeal is to begin, in a tone of dignity and disinterestedness, the consideration of the question ; for when such matters are much pulled about in public prints, and have been often discussed from many different, and not always from very high, points of view, there is ever a tendency that the decision of the parties may contract some taint of meanness from the spirit of their critics. All that is desired is to press upon you, as ministers of the Church of Scotland, some sense of the high expectation with which your country looks to you at this time ; and how many reasons there are that you should show an example of signal disinterestedness and zeal in the encouragement that you give to returning brethren. For, first, it lies with you to clear the Church from the discredit of our miserable contentions ; and surely you can never have a fairer opportunity to improve her claim to the style of a peace-maker. Again, it lies with you, as I have said, to take the

first step, and prove your own true ardour for an honourable union ; and how else are you to prove it ? It lies with you, moreover, to justify, in the eyes of the world, the time you have been enjoying your benefices, while these others have voluntarily shut themselves out from all participation in their convenience ; and how else are you to convince the world that there was not something of selfishness in your motives ? It lies with you, lastly, to keep your example unspotted before your congregations ; and I do not know how better you are to do that.

It is never a thankful office to offer advice ; and advice is the more unpalatable, not only from the difficulty of the service recommended, but often from its very obviousness. We are fired with anger against those who make themselves the spokesmen of plain obligations ; for they seem to insult us as they advise. In the present case, I should have feared to waken some such feeling, had it not been that I was addressing myself to a body of special men on a very special occasion. I know too much of the history of ideas to imagine that the sentiments advocated in this appeal are peculiar to me and a few others. I am confident that your own minds are already busy with similar reflections. But I know, at the same time, how difficult it is for one man to speak to another in such a matter ; how he is withheld by all manner of personal considerations, and dare not propose what he has nearest his heart, because the other has a larger family or a smaller stipend, or is older, more venerable, and more conscientious than himself ; and it is in view of this that I have determined to profit by the freedom of an anonymous writer, and give utterance to what many of you would have uttered already, had they been (as I am) apart from the battle. It is easy to be virtuous when one's own convenience is not affected ; and it is no shame to any man to follow the advice of an outsider who owns that, while he sees which is the better part, he might not have the courage to profit himself by this opinion.

W. Donato
at Maxwell's
85 Great Prince St
NOTE FOR THE LAITY.

THE foregoing pages have been in type since the beginning of last September. I have been advised to give them to the public; and it is only necessary to add, that nothing of all that has taken place since they were written, has made me modify an opinion, or so much as change a word. The question is not one that can be altered by circumstances.

I need not tell the laity that with them this matter ultimately rests. Whether we regard it as a question of mere expense, or as a question of good feeling against ill feeling, the solution must come from the Church members. The lay purse is the long one; and if the lay opinion does not speak from so high a place, it speaks all the week through and with innumerable voices. Trumpets and captains are all very well in their way; but if the trumpets were ever so clear, and the captains as bold as lions, it is still the army that must take the fort.

The laymen of the Church have here a question before them, on the answering of which, as I still think, many others attend. If the Established Church could throw off its lethargy, and give the Dissenters some speaking token of its zeal for union, I still think that union, to some extent, would be the result. There is a motion tabled (as I suppose all know) for the next meeting of the General Assembly; but something more than motions must be tabled, and something more must be given than votes. It lies practically with the laymen, by a new endowment scheme, to put the Church right with the world in two ways, so that those who left it more than thirty years ago, and who may now be willing to return, shall lose neither in money nor in ecclesiastical status. At the outside, what will they have to do? They will have to do for (say) ten years, what the laymen of the Free Church have done cheerfully ever since 1843.

February 12, 1875.

J. P. M. on Sabbath

